

Eleanor Holmes Norton

1937–

DELEGATE

DEMOCRAT FROM THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

1991–



Congressional Pictorial Directory
109th Congress

A CIVIL RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL LAWYER and former chair of the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, Eleanor Holmes Norton carried her lifelong commitments to Congress as the Delegate for the District of Columbia. Since 1991, Norton has been a tireless advocate of D.C. statehood and congressional voting rights, while successfully obtaining federal funds and legislation to improve the city's economy and tax base. "I have been elected to Congress not to further my own interests, but to bring resources and respect to the District of Columbia," she remarked. "The ethics of the bar require zealous representation. That's how I understand my relationship to my folks."¹

Eleanor Holmes was born in Washington, D.C., on June 13, 1937, the oldest of three daughters of Coleman Holmes, a civil servant, and Vela Lynch Holmes, a teacher. She attended Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., and earned a B.A. at Antioch College in Ohio in 1960. Norton earned an M.A. in American studies in 1963 and a law degree in 1964, both from Yale University. While in college and law school, she worked in the civil rights movement with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. After graduating, she clerked for Federal Judge A. Leon Higginbotham in Philadelphia. She then became assistant legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union. In 1965, Eleanor Holmes married Edward Norton. The couple raised two children, Katherine and John, before divorcing in 1993. In 1970, New York Mayor John Lindsay appointed Eleanor Holmes Norton to chair the New York City Commission on Human Rights.² In 1977, President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter appointed her chair of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, where she served until 1981. During the 1980s, she taught full-time as a tenured professor at Georgetown University Law Center, where she still teaches one course annually.

In 1990, Norton defeated five challengers in the Democratic primary for an open seat as the District of Columbia's Delegate in the U.S. House. In the general election, she won 62 percent of the vote in the heavily Democratic city. She faced little or no opposition in her seven re-election bids.³

When Norton took her seat in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) in January 1991, she chose three committees: District of Columbia, Post Office and Civil Service, and Public Works and Transportation (later renamed Transportation and Infrastructure). In the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she was appointed to the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress. For the first time in the city’s history, she won a vote as Delegate on the House Floor in the Committee of the Whole through a new rule she requested. The federal courts ruled that the House could grant Delegates the right to vote in the House Floor committee by rule, as it had traditionally in other committees. This right was withdrawn in the 104th Congress (1995–1997) when Republicans assumed control. In 1995, the District of Columbia Committee was absorbed by Government Reform and Oversight (later renamed Government Reform), where, along with her seat on Transportation and Infrastructure, Norton served through the 108th Congress. She also won a seat on the newly created Select Homeland Security Committee. House rules limit Delegate participation in the legislative process. Delegates may introduce legislation, speak on the House Floor, vote in committee, and even head a committee, but they cannot vote on the House Floor. Norton is the only Member of Congress whose constituents have no congressional vote, although they pay federal income taxes and serve in the military.

In the fight to secure D.C. statehood and voting rights and to improve services and infrastructure, Norton was a vocal and articulate leader during the 1990s.⁴ To grant the city statehood, she authored the New Columbia Admission Act, which went to an unsuccessful vote on the House Floor. She now sponsors the No Taxation Without Representation Act, a bill that has also been introduced in the Senate. She has made progress by partnering with the Republican chairman of the Government Reform Committee to secure bipartisan committee passage of a bill for a vote on the House Floor. In 1995, with the city in financial crisis, she joined with Republican leaders to create a financial control board to supervise city finances. Norton’s bill to transfer some state costs to the federal government led to economic recovery in the late 1990s and the elimination of the control board. Stressing education and economic development, she has secured funds for residents to attend any public U.S. college, for a new Metro subway station, for special D.C. homebuyer and business tax credits, and for redevelopment of an entire area of southeast Washington. She successfully fought congressional initiatives to nullify local laws, including a repeal of the city’s prohibition on handguns.⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, “Eleanor Holmes Norton,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

Lester, Joan Steinau, *Eleanor Holmes Norton: Fire in My Soul* (New York: Atria Books, 2003).

Marcovitz, Hal. *Eleanor Holmes Norton* (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003).

NOTES

1 Joan Steinau Lester, *Eleanor Holmes Norton: Fire in My Soul* (New York: Atria Books, 2003): 274–276.

2 “Eleanor Holmes Norton,” *Contemporary Black Biography*, Vol. 7. (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1994).

3 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.

4 “Eleanor Holmes Norton,” *Contemporary Black Biography*; Lester, *Fire in My Soul*: 286.

5 *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2001): 358–359.